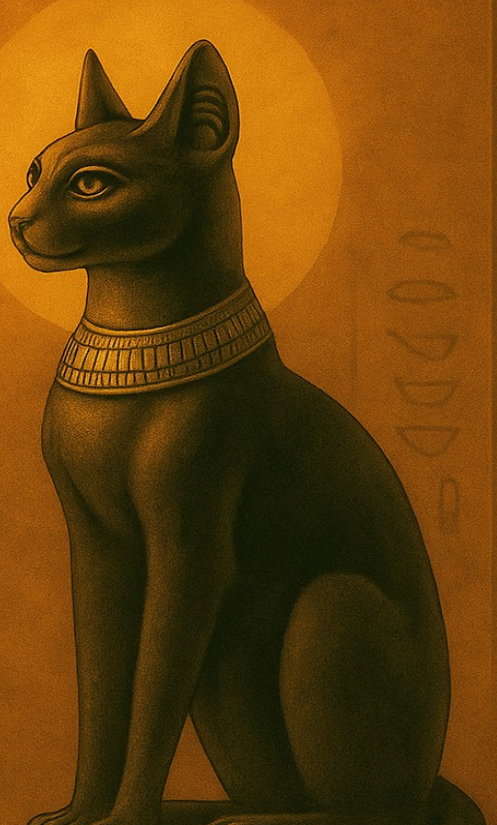
The Sacred Cats of Egypt



Cat Man Booklet's

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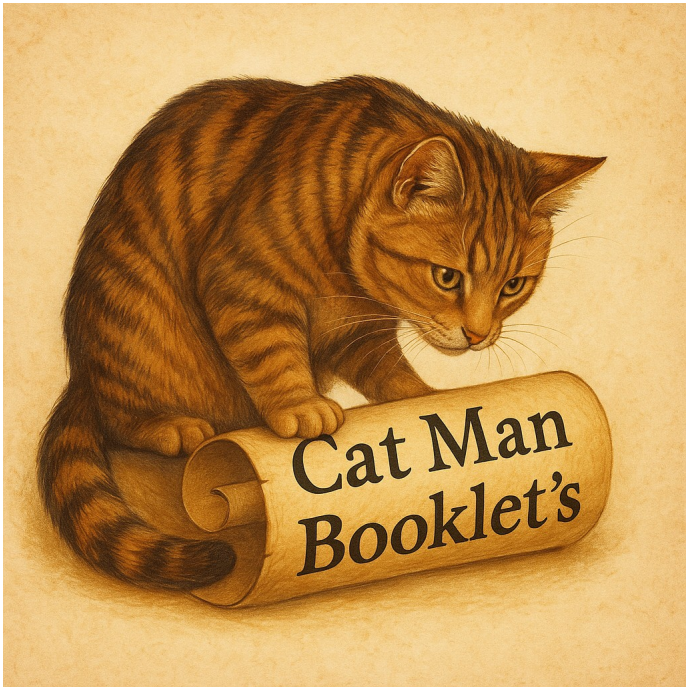

Hrsg: Cat Man (Booklet's)
Godshorn (Germany) 2025

Oh, you cat! Your head is the head of the sun god.
Oh, you cat! Your eyes are the eyes of the god Neb-achut,
who illuminates the world with his eye,
whose face shines on the road of darkness.
Oh, you cat! Your nose is the nose of Thoth,
The twice-great lord of Hermopolis,
The first of the world of the sun god,
Who gives breath to all beings.
Oh, you, this cat! Your ears are the ears of Nebter,
Who hears the voices of all who call upon him...
Oh, you, this cat! Your mouth is the mouth of the god Thum,
The lord of life.

Ah! Sun god! Come to your daughter, the cat,
For she is terrified
By the scorpion that approaches from the sky to enter your paths.
Sin has come upon her limbs and covers her body like filth.

Only with her mouth does she protect her limbs.

O! Sun god Ra! Come to your daughter!
God Shu, come to your wife!
Isis, come to your sister!
Protect the cat from the dirt
which is found on all her limbs!
Protect the cat that carries the knife against the serpent of darkness!

(Hymn to the Sun Cat)

Five thousand years ago, this hymn was sung to cats. In the land of the Nile, they were cared for and protected, revered and loved. They were sacred and inviolable. At the end of their earthly lives, they were solemnly buried in the sacred tombs of the city of Bubastis. Their bodies were embalmed so that they might share in eternal life.

Never again did cats hold such high status. Throughout the ages, humans appreciated their help. They took cats to ever more distant lands to help chase away mice and rats. But were humans always grateful to cats?
They fell out of favor. They were slaughtered for their fur and meat. Superstition turned them into dangerous, supernatural beings. In the Middle Ages, they were seen as devils; they were tortured and hunted.

And today? In many countries, people appreciate the usefulness and grace of cats. But nowhere does anyone bow down to them anymore. The mummies of Egyptian cats were taken from their tombs and loaded onto ships. In 1890, two cargo ships full of cat bodies sailed from Alexandria to Liverpool. This was not done to honor the ancestors of cats; the merchants only had the "utilization" of this "raw material" in mind; they thought of the profit that these dead cats could bring them: 18 English pounds per ton was the price achieved at auction. And the man who bought the sacred bodies processed them in his factory ~ into fertilizer...

This cat is the sun itself,
according to chapter 17 of the "Book of the Dead." The book tells of the battle between the sun god Ra and the serpent of darkness.
Ra appears in the form of a tomcat. He carries a large knife in one paw, while with the other he presses down the head of the serpent, symbol of Set, Ra's arch-enemy. The serpent twitches and writhes. But Ra is more powerful. With one powerful stroke, he severs its head from its body – victory of light over darkness.

The 75 praises to Ra, written on the walls of the royal tombs of the 19th and 20th dynasties in Thebes, also refer to the god as "Great Cat Ra." "Praise be to you, O Ra, exalted Sekhem, you are the Great Cat, avenger of the gods, judge of speech, chairman of all rulers, leader of the sacred circle, you are truly the embodiment of the Great Cat."

Ra's daughter was Bastet, the moon goddess. She was the wife of Ptah, the great god of Memphis. In ancient times, during the First Dynasty, she still appeared with a lion's head, but soon only with a cat's head. She was the patron saint of the moon, joy, birth, and the blessing of children. Plutarch saw the following connection between these things and the cat: "The cat is spotted like the moon, and like the moon, it only awakens at night. Furthermore, the cat first gives birth to only one kitten, then two the following year, three the year after that, and so on until the seventh year, for a total of 28 kittens, the same number as the days in a lunar month. Moreover, the cat indicates the hours of the day and night: it urinates punctually every hour."

The Greeks later equated Bastet with Artemis, the goddess of childbirth and protector of women. At Beni-Hassan-el-Amar, there is an Artemis grotto which contains images of Bastet and many cat graves.

Thus, at the beginning of the relationship between humans and cats, the cat was a divine being. Humans placed it above themselves and prayed to it. The ancient Egyptians also deified other animals, such as the ibis and the vulture, which, according to the Egyptians, absorbed the souls of deceased animals along with the carrion they consumed. In this way, they cleansed the human environment not only of carcasses, but also of the restless, wandering souls of dead animals. In some parts of the country, the crocodile was worshipped, and Apis, the bull, was also a high deity. The sacred bulls lived in temples, ate their food from golden bowls, and the highest dignitaries of the land gave them water. But why were cats sacred? How did they earn such honors?

Let us remember the story of Joseph in the Old Testament!
Joseph had been sold into Egypt by his brothers and was imprisoned by Pharaoh. The king dreamed of seven fat cows and seven lean cows, and Joseph interpreted the dream for him:

Seven years of plenty will come throughout the land of Egypt. And after them there will be seven years of famine. Gather all the food of the good years that are coming, and store it in Pharaoh's granaries in the cities, and keep it there, so that food may be provided for the land during the seven years of famine, lest the land be

destroyed by famine. And the land yielded abundantly in the seven years of plenty; and they gathered all the food of the seven years and put it in the cities. Now when the seven years of plenty were over, the seven years of famine began, and there was famine in all lands; but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. (Genesis 41)

Egypt almost always lived under the threat of "dearth," the lean years. If the Nile did not carry enough water, if it did not flood and fertilize the land because there had been too little rain in the interior of Africa, the earth remained barren and desolate. The Egyptians could only survive if there were sufficient supplies in the storehouses. And it was vital that these supplies did not spoil. However, the most dangerous enemies of the supplies were small rodents, mice, and rats. The damage they caused in the granaries was not just an annoying loss: it was a threat to life. That is why people looked for a savior and helper against these dangerous enemies. They found it and idolized it, for it protected their lives: the cat.

The ancestry of the cat

For the Egyptians, the cat was a necessity of life. This explains not only the divine status to which they elevated the cat and the cults they practiced around and for the cat —we will hear more about this later—but also why it was the Egyptians who tamed the cat and accustomed it to living in the house. This work must have required an infinite amount of love and patience!

The Nubian cat or African wildcat, which was native to the upper Nile region, is the ancestor of all our cats. Perhaps prehistoric African peoples had already begun to tame them. Certainly, it was the Egyptians who completed the work of accustoming this freedom-loving animal to humans.

However, it is not entirely clear when exactly they achieved their goal.

The first depictions of cats in Egyptian art date back to the 12th Dynasty (around 1800 BC). It was during this period that the Egyptians expanded their empire upriver towards Nubia. It is possible that they first encountered cats during these military campaigns and then brought them home with them. However, this is contradicted by the fact that there are symbols in the pyramids – inscriptions from the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties (around 2300 BC) – which Egyptologists have identified as words for "cat" and "tomcat." "Miu" would have meant "tomcat" and "Miut" "cat." In more recent inscriptions, the cat is then called "Mau." "Miu" or "Mau": Both are, of course, onomatopoeic imitations of the cat's voice, comparable to our "meow" or the word "Mao," which means "cat" in Chinese.

As befits deities, Egyptian cats enjoyed the most careful care from humans. Every day they were served exquisite delicacies; they slept in soft beds and were perfumed after getting up. The rooms in which they stayed had to be consecrated. Warm baths and fragrant ointments were part of the daily body care routine for cats at that time. Cats with a more delicate constitution received

particularly loving care. Even the most expensive medicines were considered affordable when it came to providing relief for a cat. During mating season, a suitable mate was chosen for each animal with great care.

The Egyptians even appointed cat priests and high cat priests to care for their beloved pets. Such an office was by no means ridiculous. On the contrary, it was extremely honorable.

Everyone bowed down to the ground in greeting before a cat priest. During temple service, the cat priests had to behave in a cat-like manner: "liveliness," "graceful suppleness," and "graceful movement of the body" had to accompany all their actions. It was not uncommon for the highest cat priests to be members of the government and to have insight into state affairs and influence over the pharaoh's decisions. Indeed, it even happened that the new king was chosen from among the ranks of the cat priests!

However, the cat priests had to lead a strictly regulated and controlled life. They were hardly ever allowed to leave the temple district and had to remain unmarried. Each cat priest wore the image of the animal entrusted to him on his chest. And woe betide him!
If anything happened to a protégé, not only was the career of the guardian at stake, but also his life!

The cats themselves, of course, were happy to accommodate this worship and began to display an increasingly mysterious, sometimes even haughty nature. Perhaps it was then that cats acquired their enigmatic

and inscrutable facial expressions, their secretive behavior, and their ominous, stealthy gait! Cats were, as it were, trained to behave in a reserved and somewhat selfish manner, for they would not have lived up to their reputation as gods if they had shown themselves to be trusting and "simple."

Cats enjoyed their beneficial role: if people believed that the souls of all the animals they had killed lived on in cats, then cats began to look as if a thousand souls and spirits dwelled within them. It is difficult to say, however, whether cats actually began to behave so cunningly because they were said to be so mysterious, or whether people did so because cats knew how to act so cunningly...

The Egyptians' worship of cats went so far that it became the downfall of the entire country:
When Cambyses, the ambitious Persian king, wanted to conquer Egypt, he besieged the city of Pelusium for weeks. This city was called the "key to the Nile Valley" and was so well fortified that it was considered impregnable. The brave Pharaoh Psammetic and his soldiers defended it heroically. Time and again, Cambyses and his warriors fought bloody battles against the fortress. The losses were great, and Cambyses was forced to retreat. Then a Greek mercenary captain who had defected to the enemy suggested a new tactic: Cambyses should have a large number of cats captured.

Each soldier was to attach a cat to the front of his shield with ribbons, and thus equipped, the entire army was to advance against the fortress. The attack was a gamble.

The Egyptians would have had the opportunity to destroy the entire army of Cambyses. But lo and behold!

The Egyptians did not dare to shoot!

They found themselves in a terrible dilemma. If they had shot their arrows and spears at the Persians, they would have endangered the cats. But the sacred animals could not be killed at any price! The defenders dropped their weapons. Thus, the Persians succeeded in taking the city without a sword stroke or spear throw!

With cats, the Egyptians lost battles; if they wanted to win, they had to call on the lion for help. A historical account of the battles Ramses II had to fight against the Hittites states: "The great lion accompanied the pharaoh's chariot and fought alongside him against the enemies. Rage made all his limbs tremble, and the blows he dealt were terrible. Whoever approached him was struck down by his paw." This scene is also depicted in paintings in the tomb where Ramses II was buried: the lion rushes alongside the chariot, striking blows left and right. Another image on one of the columns of Luxor shows the lion resting on the pharaoh's bed; however, it is chained and guarded by a guardian armed with a heavy club. Ramses III also kept a lion as a faithful companion.

Respect for cats in ancient Egypt was not only spontaneous, it was also enshrined in law. The life of a cat was considered more precious than that of a human being. If, for example, a house was on fire, the cats were brought to safety first, only then the children. And if a cat did die in a conflagration, the family was plunged into deepest mourning. All human "relatives" of a cat had to shave their eyebrows, sing dirges for days, and wear mourning clothes. Or if the whole country was starving

during a war, cats always had to have enough to eat, and no one would have thought of slaughtering a cat and eating its meat.

Yes! The law was: "Whoever kills a cat must die, even if it was unintentional." The unfortunate person who had caused the death of a cat through some mistake was lost: the people immediately gathered together and carried out the death penalty on the spot without trial or judicial judgment. Mitigating circumstances were not considered in such cases.

Therefore, it was also customary for someone who came across a dead cat to burst into loud lamentations and repeatedly assert that he was not the murderer of the animal. Only if he could prove that he had found the cat already dead could he remain alive.

In this context, the Roman historian Diodorus tells us of an event that had world-historical consequences and of which he was an eyewitness: It was at the time of the tremendous expansion of the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean. In Egypt, however, the native pharaoh still ruled, and for the time being he knew how to maintain good relations with the Romans.

Then it happened that a Roman accidentally caused the death of a cat. The stranger fled to his house as quickly as possible and sent a messenger to the pharaoh to report the unfortunate incident.

The pharaoh immediately sent soldiers to guard and protect the Roman's house. But the outraged Egyptians

ad already stormed the stranger's property, seized him, and killed him. The Romans are said to have used this case of lynch justice against a Roman citizen as a "casus belli," a reason for military attack on Egypt.

Cat cults

Nothing in ancient Egypt was as shrouded in cults and rituals as death. The pyramids, the wall paintings, the vessels and jewelry, almost all witnesses to ancient Egyptian culture, were not created for the living. It seems as if the Egyptians lived solely for a glorious death, as if this goal in life had always been before their eyes. The death of an animal was also always significant, and the burial of animals always followed certain rules. Ibis birds, for example, had to be buried in Hermopolis, dogs in special sacred tombs that existed for this purpose in every city; only bears and wolves, which were rare and – according to the few existing depictions – smaller than in Europe, were allowed to be buried where they were found.

The burial of a cat in ancient Egypt was an almost improbably ritualistic affair. The grieving owners of the cat wrapped the body in fine linen and took it to be embalmed—just as if a human family member had died. Then the cat's body was immersed in cedar oil and all kinds of essences that preserved it from decay and also exuded a wonderful, balsamic scent. Then the mummified body was placed in a coffin—its immortality was now assured. And on a certain day, the whole family traveled with the dead cat to Bubastis, the city of the cat goddess Bastet, in Lower Egypt.

There, pompous funeral ceremonies for dead cats took place every year.

It was one of the most important holidays in Egypt. People flocked from all parts of the country. Most came downstream on Nile boats and had traveled for days. Those who brought cat mummies with them bore all the signs of mourning: they had shaved their eyebrows, smeared their faces, and staggered along in a kind of mental confusion. There were weeping old men, men crying out in grief, and beautiful women beating their breasts, their features distorted and their bodies emaciated.

Monotonous funeral music sounded everywhere, and painful sounds of flutes and rattles could be heard. The most important instrument was the "sistrum." It consists of an iron bow attached to a handle, which represents the universe. Four iron hooks are attached to it in such a way that when the sistrum is shaken, they strike the round arch and rattle. The four crossbars symbolize the four elements that make up the universe: fire, earth, water, and air. At the top of the round arch sits a small sphinx: a cat's body with a human face. This cat, at the top of the arch of the universe, represents both the sun god Ra and the moon goddess Bastet: the life-sustaining celestial bodies in the firmament.
What were the funeral ceremonies held for people in Egypt compared to such an outburst of grief, such an outpouring of lamentation? When Hephaestion died in Egypt, Alexander the Great, in his grief—according to Plutarch—forbade all flute playing and all music in the camp.

To numb his grief, Alexander indulged in the wildest debauchery, unleashed a war, hunted people, cruelly subjugated the people of Kos, had the walls and battlements of cities torn down; horses and mules had their manes and tails cut off. But what is all this compared to the eyebrows of the most beautiful women in Egypt?

Only the funeral of a pharaoh surpassed the annual cat lamentations in Bubastis in terms of expense and solemnity. Seven hundred thousand priests gathered in honor of the deceased cats. The celebrations began with sacrifices to the goddess Bast, whose golden statue—a cat—stood in the middle of the temple district. Then the crowd moved to the cemetery, where cat priests buried the embalmed bodies in endless ceremonies. The "relatives" of the cats gave their beloved pets precious food and toys to take with them to the grave, made new sacrifices, and sang ritual farewell songs.

After the funeral ceremony, a great feast began outside the gates of the sacred cemetery. Herodotus reports that wine was drunk freely, sometimes more freely than would have been appropriate for a funeral meal. Many probably toasted the soul of their dead cat more than once...

There were families who spent their last money on this trip to Bubastis and on the burial of their cat, who were literally penniless when they returned home from the sacred city. But it would have been much worse for them if they had had to tell themselves that they had neglected the soul of their deceased cat.

Thousands of cat mummies and countless milk bowls, from which the souls of the dead were supposed to feed, were found during excavations in Bubastis.
We have reported on the sad fate of these mummies.

Cat art

Of course, the cat was one of the most prominent motifs in ancient Egyptian art. Excavations in Bubastis and Beni Hassan unearthed a large number of bronze cat statuettes. The cats were depicted sitting, lying down, walking, and in every conceivable pose. Particularly famous is the bronze sculpture depicting a mother cat with her four kittens; three kittens are suckling, while the fourth is playing.

Cats are also frequently depicted in tomb paintings. The British Museum in London has various paintings from women's tombs in Thebes in which cats can be seen – "as a sign of the protection of the goddess Bastet," as it is said.

The cat caricatures found on papyrus fragments, which can also be admired in the British Museum, are peculiar. For example, one shows a rat sitting dignifiedly on an armchair, being fanned from behind by a second rat, and a cat holding a huge lotus flower under the rat's nose with one paw in a comical manner; The rat inhales the scent with relish. Another drawing depicts an upright tomcat and a cat sitting proudly on a throne; the tomcat carries a fan in one paw and offers the cat a plucked goose with the other; the cat herself holds a flower in one paw and a drinking bowl in the other.

The depiction of a hunting scene is puzzling: hunters stride through dense reeds and are obviously accompanied by a cat as a hunting aid. So was the cat also a hunting companion in Egypt? It seems so. The noble Egyptians were very passionate about hunting waterfowl. They used a kind of boomerang as a hunting weapon, which was a great art to throw skillfully.

And apparently they took cats with them as "scent hounds," which were undoubtedly very well suited to sneaking through the thicket and flushing out game or retrieving the killed animals from the impenetrable reed forest. It must be assumed, however, that these cats trained for hunting were not afraid of water; they must even have been good swimmers. One of the hunting scenes shows a cat plunging into the water with an elegant leap. For this reason, some cultural historians believed that Egyptian hunting cats were not ordinary wildcats, but either cheetahs or swamp cats.

The cat in modern Egypt

Ancient Egypt came to an end, but the domestic cat is one of its cultural legacies. Although cat smuggling was punishable by death in ancient Egypt, Egyptian cats did occasionally find their way abroad. Phoenician sailors took cats on their ships, kept them there as ship cats, and brought isolated cats to Europe, possibly as far as England, even in pre-Christian times. Later, it was Egyptian monks who brought cats to Arabia and later also to Greece and Italy. However, with the arrival of Christianity in Egypt, difficult times began for cats.

The once sacred animal was suddenly despised and tormented, associated with the devil and paganism, and feared. Cats had to endure unspeakable cruelty and persecution. It is fortunate that even before this period of cat hatred, some cats had already come to Europe from Egypt and that the Egyptian hermit monks did not share the aversion of the other Christians. At that time, they were the only people who appreciated the company of cats and who also cared for them.

It is probably thanks to them that cats were not exterminated in early Christian times. Thus, the cats of Egypt were able to survive the difficult period. Today, they are valued there again, although no longer considered sacred, except in Kennek, in Upper Egypt, where no one is allowed to harm a cat with impunity. The inhabitants of Kennek believe that the souls of children sometimes slip into cats at night.

The ancient Egyptian love of cats has now merged with the Arab love of cats. Sultan Ez-Zahir Beibar had a specially designed garden called "gheyt el-kuttah," meaning "garden of the cat." This garden had everything necessary for the cat's enjoyment and well-being. There were dark corners, soft cushions, warm stones, balls, and balls of fabric as toys, and every day the sultan's servants had to procure two mice, which then had to give up their lives in the "Garden of the Cat." In the harems, cats were pampered and even adorned with earrings. Until recently, it was customary for the annual great Mecca caravan to be accompanied by several cats, which were looked after by a "cat mother" who traveled with them. And even

today, in some places, the cats of the village are fed daily at the expense of the community. It also happens time and again that legacies are made in favor of cats.

And so, in every domestic cat lives a breath of that divine Bastet who once guarded the Nile.

Original text from the work
"Mau Mao Miau – Die Katze durch die Jahrtausende"
by Mischa Damjan and Rudolf Schilling,
published in 1969 by Eugen Diederichs Verlag.

For your notes

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